

# JOURNAL CARIBBEAN STUDIES

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Caribbean New York:  
Paule Marshall's *Brown Girl, Brownstones* and  
Piri Thomas's *Down These Mean Streets*

Roberto Strongman

Home is a place to escape to and a place to escape from,  
Rosemary George, *The Politics of Home*

The theme of traveling to the metropolitan center is an important one in Caribbean cultural production. Novels from the region often address mass migrations of Caribbean citizens to the large cities of North America and Europe, often the former colonial center, in search of bettering their socio-economic situation by work or education. Two texts from the mid-century stand as important in this tradition of representing Caribbean migration: Paule Marshall's *Brown Girl, Brownstones* (1959) and Piri Thomas' *Down these Mean Streets* (1967). These texts stand as important works within the representation of Caribbean migration because their protagonists no longer move from the Caribbean to the metropole: they are born in the metropole and stand, allegorically, as personifications of a new hybrid community which is neither the nation of origin nor the host country. These hybrid characters then problematize Fredric Jameson's claims as they demonstrate that allegories need not necessarily be "national" but that they may refer to other related forms of belonging, such as diasporic communities. Clearly, when allegory has as its integral message the exposure of migration and displacement at its core, it becomes very difficult to attribute to it the colonizing interpretation Aijaz Ahmad gives it.<sup>1</sup>

"Piri," the Nuyorican boy-protagonist of *Down these Mean Streets*, and Selina Boyce, the Barbadian-American main character of *Brown Girl, Brownstones*, are children maturing with the culture of their family's origin and that of their new and "native" US urban environment, New York City.

If in these Caribbean narratives New York City is presented as the end-point of Caribbean migration and the birthplace of new identities it is because, with the increased affordability of international travel since the 1950s and the related and unprecedented mass-migrations of poor migrants to Euro-US cities,



Caribbean groups have been drawn to New York in large numbers and their US-born descendants make up a significant portion of this city's population. As Nancy Foner notes,

In a jet plane, inexpensive air fares mean that immigrants, especially those from nearby places in the Caribbean and Central America, can fly home for emergencies, such as funerals, or celebrations, such as weddings; and sometimes move back and forth, in the manner of commuters, between New York and their home community. (362-363)

The fact that these migrants are able to "commute" between New York and their countries of origin implies a reconceptualization of traditional ideas about migration. The idea of Diaspora, a nation in movement, as opposed to the traditional idea of the nation as static and geographically-bound allows for such a reconsideration of migration in globalized world:

a common assumption is that earlier European immigration cannot be described in the transnational terms that apply today. . . In a transnational perspective, contemporary immigrants are seen as maintaining familial, economic, political, and cultural ties across international borders, in effect making the home and host societies a single arena of social action. (Foner 355)

The ideas that during Modernity drastic changes have affected migration and that these changes have augmented during the last half of the Twentieth Century are also emphasized by Tötölyan, another important writer on Diaspora:

some of the phenomena characteristic of our transnational moment are as old as history. . . [b]ut the past five centuries have been a time of fragmentation, heterogeneity, and unparalleled mass dispersion; additionally, the past five decades have been a time of cultural and political regrouping, of renewed confidence for ethnonations exiting across the boundaries of the nation-states. (Tötölyan 4)

In this essay, I want to trace the many trajectories and the significance of travel as a developmental trope in Piri Thomas' *Down these Mean Streets* and Paule Marshall's *Brown Girl, Brownstones* in order to critique the notion of progressive development and to question nationhood through the idea of Diaspora.

The very title of *Brown Girl, Brownstones* presents the allegorical relationship of identity and community, according to critic Eugenia

DeLamotte, who reads in it elements of connection and opposition that are developed throughout the novel:

a girl reflected by and reflecting her world, but not identical with it; part of it but also a single individual pitted against its collective conformities, battling alone the "army" of brownstones but then, at the end, finding her identity in the community as well as in opposition to it. (4)

In following Selina Boyce's life from early childhood to young adulthood during the nineteen thirties and forties, the text carefully traces the progress of her family, her Brooklyn neighborhood and the Barbadian-American community of which she is a part. Selina's family environment is dominated by the figure of her mother, Silla, whose ambition and determination are most visible in her attempts to buy a house and in her control of her husband Deighton and her daughters Selina and Ina. The economic ambitions of Silla are mirrored and critiqued in the revelation of the Association of Barbadian Homeowners and Businessmen as a group of exclusionary, greedy, selfish social-climbers. Selina's public refusal of a scholarship from the Association asserts her independence from the larger Barbadian-American community and the self-serving economic aspirations of the Association and of her mother. This break with the Association is textually echoed in Selina's relationship with her family and neighborhood. With Deighton's death and Ina's marriage, Selina's overseas travel at the end of the text stands as the final dismemberment of the family. This familial dissolution is mirrored in her neighborhood's aesthetic decay, new ethnic composition and structural transformation epitomized in the demolishing of the brownstones she so much admires. In general terms, Selina's coming of age involves an individuation characterized by her moral and physical separation from her mother, ethnic community and geographical context. The transformations taking place in each of these contexts—the decay of the family unit, the neighborhood and the Association—promote this process of individuation for Selina. As the communal is revealed as an unreliable source of identification, Selina's quest for self-formation takes her away from these social structures and leads her to explore new grounds for identity. The open-endedness of this narrative and of the majority of coming-of-age novels reveals the nature of self-formation as an on-going, always unfinished process.

If in *Brown Girl, Brownstones* Paule Marshall veils herself through



the autobiographical literary persona of Selina Boyce, the author of *Down these Mean Streets* is much more self-revealing (Williams 127). Piri Thomas merges the authorial and fictional persona in this Nuyorican novel almost as successfully as he integrates his Puerto Rican and US identities and his Latino culture with his African descent. Piri's coming-of-age in El Barrio, the Puerto Rican neighborhood of East Harlem, during the nineteen thirties and forties, is a testament to the difficulties of negotiating multiple identities. Piri's racial difficulties in El Barrio, where he is ambiguously read as Puerto Rican and African-American, and in the Long Island, where he is subjected to white suburbia's racism force Piri to question the arbitrary nature of racial categories and to fashion for himself an identity free of essentialist claims of "purity" or authenticity. As a Puerto Rican living in the United States, Piri needs to confront not only his colonized status but also his diasporic and exiled condition. Not being able to name himself racially and nationally, Piri undergoes a narrative quest-of-the-self which takes him out of Harlem and out of his household to Long Island, the South, even to prison.

Piri's development is therefore a journey which can be traced through the many different locales and migrations to sites marking personal growth. The novel's structure itself solicits this interpretation. The titles of the chapters, "Harlem," "Suburbia," "Down South," index Piri's personal maturation as travel. Piri's first migration is the move he makes with his family to Long Island. Piri's mother and father decide to move to Long Island in order to provide what in their minds is a better environment for Piri and his children, all the while ignoring the deep sense of anomie and cultural estrangement which this dislocation places on their children and particularly on Piri, the darkest sibling who is often (mis)taken for African-American. The racism which Piri confronts and the deep sense of alienation resulting from this drive Piri to return to the Barrio, leaving his family behind. This second journey confirms Piri's sense of identity as a Puerto Rican and at the same time complicates it by marking his realization of himself as Black. His third journey, his brief return to suburban Long Island, is Piri's attempt at contrasting both locales in order to verify his allegiances to place and to re-connect with his family and appreciate the status of his individuality in relation to his familial reference group. In this occasion Piri is able to voice to his family in straightforward language his deep sense of alienation from suburban Long Island culture. His fourth journey, his trip back to Harlem, is a momentary

stop before embarking on an important trip to the US South with his African-American friend Brew in an attempt to connect with a mythical, originary and original site of US Blackness. In the South, Piri joins the crew of a ship which takes him to many ports of call around the world. After this journey, Piri return to Harlem with a more confident sense of himself as a multiply-positioned being, living in the interstices of racial categories. In *Down these Mean Streets*, Piri's life-story is narrated as travel, his geographical movements speaking to psychological changes within him. His travels begin early, even before his birth. Piri's status as a Puerto Rican born in the US mainland makes it possible to speak of his migration as ante-dating his birth and therefore, right from the start, as a trait constitutive of his very existence.

In *Brown Girl, Brownstones* travel is also an important trope which, in a manner very similar to Piri's, begins with Selina's parents migration to the United States from Barbados. Selina's father forced return to Barbados proves fatal for him as he falls off the ship and drowns within sight of Barbados. His deportation in fact causes his death and speaks to the impossibility of imposing development and change on an individual. Selina's preparations for a trip to Barbados at the end of the text can be seen as the culmination of her self-cultivation, as her final statement of independence from her mother and her negative views on Barbados and as an achievement of her father's failed return.

In general, the journeys in *Down these Mean Streets* and *Brown Girl, Brownstones* can be divided into two subsets involving migrations to New York on the one hand and return to originary points on the other. The migrations to New York City express developmentalism in an extreme fashion with Barbados and Puerto Rico presented as areas of crises and economic lethargy out of which it is imperative to escape and climb out of in order to "get ahead." Like Piri's parents, Selina's parents were part of a wave of Caribbean immigrants who came to the United States after World War I (Denniston 10). In *Brown Girl, Brownstones*, Selina's parents' migrations stand as separate paths of entry into the United States. Silla, Selina's mother, enters legally. She arrives at eighteen, after begging her mother to borrow the money to allow her to travel to the US. Deighton, Selina's father, on the other hand, enters illegally. He goes to Cuba, where he jumps ship to the US. His illegal entry into the US is no family secret. When the draft is enforced, Deighton does not worry for he knows he cannot be called upon to serve:



I's something to draft too? He laughed bitterly. "As far as the record goes I ain even in this country since I did enter illegally. Y'know that's a funny thing when you think of it. I don even exist as far as these people here go." (66)

Piri's mother and father don't have to worry about illegal entries. As Puerto Ricans, they are US citizens at birth. Interestingly, in leaving Long Island for Harlem, Piri replicates his parents' move from the Puerto Rican countryside to New York City. While in Long Island, Piri begins to toy with the idea of moving to Harlem: "I had the crazy idea that I could save some money and take a pad in Harlem, maybe for Momma, the kids, and me" (89).

All these travel narratives which have New York City as their destination share a deep sense of developmentalism. Progress underwriters these migrations, as travelers move from areas of economic underdevelopment to one of the most densely urbanized areas of the industrialized globe. They operate in a teleological manner, the arrival in New York giving meaning to a journey driven by the hope of improving the living conditions of migrants.

Puerto Rican migration to New York City has a long history. In the 19th century there was a small colony of Puerto Ricans based in New York who worked for the independence of the island. After the annexation of the island following the Spanish American War, a steady stream of Puerto Ricans began arriving in the mainland. In 1910 there were some 1,500 Puerto Ricans in the US; in 1930, there were 53,000 (Cordasco 1975). The migration of Puerto Ricans to the mainland was substantially reduced during the Depression and World War II. After the end of the war and the advent of inexpensive air travel, migration climbed steadily until it reached a peak in the 1950s with over 74,000 Puerto Ricans living in the US at the time. Luis Williams notes,

[Many Puerto Ricans], like the Thomases, abandoned the island after World War I, hoping to improve their condition and benefit from the prosperity the United States enjoyed before the stock market crashed in 1929. During that period many Puerto Ricans were subjected to racial and national prejudice, especially as the numbers of dark-skinned Puerto Ricans increased. (Williams 124)

It becomes significant to note how Piri Thomas, having been born in East Harlem in 1928 is part of the first large Puerto Rican generation native to New York City. The interbellum period in

which he sets his novel is also significant in that it is a formative period for the Puerto Rican community of East Harlem. It is a community which Puerto

Ricans at that time share with some of the previous inhabitants of the neighborhood, Italians and Jews. It is also a period in which there is not much mobility between the community and the island. Affordable air travel is not a common occurrence then, and so the community struggles to maintain a strong sense of cultural autonomy without close links to the island. Piri's writing the novel in the 1950s responds to the large influx of arrivals in El Barrio at that time and the need to explain, shape, and historicize the neighborhood to accommodate these new arrivals.

While there was already a substantial Barbadian presence in New York City, particularly in Harlem, in the 1920s, most Barbadians who decided to migrate during the first half of the 20th Century went to England (Gmelch 52). The migration of West Indians to England intensified in the early 1950s, meeting with a lot of resentment there. In the mid-1950s, right-wing groups and Conservative members of Parliament pressed for a control in the migration of "colored people." Nativist sentiment led to racial violence during the summer of 1958 and were followed by much racial tension in London and Nottingham. By 1961, 73% of Britons favored a control on immigration. This led to the passage of the 1962 Commonwealth Immigrants Act which placed heavy restrictions on immigration (Gmelch 52). With Britain slamming its doors, many Barbadians opted to migrate to the United States and Canada, which at the time eased their migration policies in response to the British closure. Paule Marshall, the daughter of a Barbadian family who migrates in the 1920s, writes *Brown Girl, Brownstones* precisely during the times of intense racial violence in Britain. Marshall's novel is certainly responding to the call for communal definition of the Barbadian community demanded by the racial violence in Britain. In the same vein, Marshall's novel answers to the need to portray a Barbadian-American community which finds itself as the new preferred destination for Barbadians needing to travel abroad.

Far from being fulfilled by the promise of employment and raising standards of living in New York City, what many Barbadians, Puerto Ricans and other migrant groups experience is a deep disappointment in the face of metropolitan unemployment and underemployment. The disappointing nature of these migrants' journeys enacts a critique of the notion of development as



it presents how "progress" does not always work towards the bettering of conditions for everyone. As it can be surmised, the disappointment of arrival in New York City, the telos of these developmental narratives of migration, promotes a consideration of the idea of return for many migrants and this disposition towards returning to their places of origin is found in the characters of *Down these Mean Streets* and *Brown Girl, Brownstones*.

Selina's father, Deighton, is perhaps the character who most explicitly epitomizes the desire of return. As mentioned earlier, Deighton enters the US illegally. He meets and marries Silla and soon, his alcoholism, impractical idealism, and chronic unemployment begin to clash with the determination of his wife and start to have a negative impact on the marriage. One of the sources of contention between Silla and Deighton involves the use of a plot of land in Barbados which Deighton has just inherited from a relative:

"We ain't rich but we got land"

"Is it a lot?"

"Two acres almost. I know the piece of ground good. You could throw down I-don-know-what on it and it would grow. And we gon have a house there—just like the white people own. A house to end all house!" (12)

Deighton, after having migrated to the US and having experienced the disappointment of unemployment and feelings of displacement, harbors the hope of returning to Barbados and building a house there. As critic Dorothy Denniston argues, "Only his dream of returning to Barbados to live in high style allows Deighton to suffer the indignities of gossip and isolation" (20). Silla, who is determined not to leave New York despite the hardship she herself has endured cleaning houses and washing floors for other people, tries to convince her husband that the best course of action is to sell the land and, with that money, buy their own brownstone in Brooklyn:

At night the children were often awakened by muffled arguments from the master bedroom; savage words sparked in the darkness: Sell it, sell it. . . and always the same reply, growing more weary each night but persisting, "It's mine to do as I please. . ." (51).

Silla's determination to make it work in New York for her and her family is disseminated and inculcated onto the other members of

the family via the recounting of memories which present Barbados as an economically inhospitable place. Silla narrates to Selina the hardship she herself endured as a child in order to quell the growing interest and affection which her child appears to show for her parent's homeland:

The third class is a set of little children picking grass in a cane field from the time God sun rise in his heaven till it set. With some woman called a Driver to wash yuh tail in licks if yuh dare look up. Yes, working harder than a man at the age of ten. . . And when it was hard times. . . I would put a basket of mangoes 'pon muh head and go selling early-early 'pon a morning." (45)

Silla's view of her homeland contrast sharply with her husband's and with the other characters' in *Down these Mean Streets* and *Brown Girl, Brownstones*. Her voice stands as the staunch, assimilated voice of reason, and of the determination of immigrants to attain the mythical "American dream." As such, Silla not only propagates stories which paint Barbados as an unwelcoming place, she also participates in elitist-hegemonic discourses which privilege the urban industrialized world over the underdeveloped regions of the globe. When her husband makes plans to build the house in Barbados, Silla warns him: "I know you. As soon as you got home you'd be ready to come back. You cun live on no small island after living in New York" (115). Silla goes so far in her internalization of US supremacist discourse that, when her husband abandons the household, she denounces her husband to the authorities and has him deported. As if her cold, unsentimental, rational determination made her oblivious to her own immigrant status, she screams to the officers: "Let him go back to where he come from!" (183).

Throughout her interaction and dealings with her husband, Silla demonstrates herself not only capable of selling the land behind his back but also of selling out herself. In *Brown Girl, Brownstones*, Silla's lack of attachment to her land of birth and ancestry is presented as a dangerous trait of disastrous consequences. On the forced return trip to Barbados, Deighton drowns:

On the day the war ended, a cable arrived saying that Deighton Boyce had either jumped or fallen overboard and drowned at a point within sight of the Barbados coast and that a post-humous burial service had been read at sea (185).

When Selina finds out that her mother's actions have resulted in



her father's death, she voices her final repudiation of her mother calling her "Hitler!" Immediately after this reactionary act, Selina asserts her independence by leaving for Barbados, fulfilling her childhood interest in the island despite her mother's long-standing disapproval and lack of encouragement on this enterprise:

"I think I'd like it."

"Like what?"

"Going there to live."

"What you know 'bout Bimshire?"

"Nothing, but it must be a nice place." (45)

Deighton's and Selina's desire to return to Barbados are symptomatic of their disillusionment with the American Dream. The unemployment Deighton endures in this Land of Opportunity has a demoralizing effect on him. The racism which he encounters in the United States nurtures fantasies of a return to Barbados to build a home. Selina is equally disenchanted with the racism and poverty which her family endures in a country which promised them equality and economic advancement. Moreover, the American Dream, personified in Silla through her staunch determination to succeed in the US, reveals its deception and true violence as it expels Deighton, ushering him to his death. Selina's condemnation of her mother's heartless determination amount to a rejection of the ideal of the American Dream. The realization of this disappointment experienced in New York propels her to find, like her father before her, a home in Barbados.

Piri and his family in *Down these Mean Streets* suffer from a nostalgia of return to a mythical and elusive homeland as well. Throughout the novel, Piri's mother complains of the cold of New York winters and spends her time elaborating an idyllic, bucolic image of Puerto Rico which she presents to her children:

Moma talked about Puerto Rico and how great it was, and how she'd like to go back one day, and how it was warm all the time there and no matter how poor you were over there, you could always live on green bananas, bacalao, and rice and beans. "Dios mío," she said. "I don't think I'll ever see my island again." (9)

Piri's mother's nostalgia for Puerto Rico echoes Deighton's own desire to return to Barbados to build a house. Their lament aptly illustrates the theoretical work of Diaspora critic William Safran who holds forth the idea that "the myth of return serves to solidify

ethnic consciousness and solidarity when religion can no longer do so, when the cohesiveness of the local community is loosened, and when the family is threatened with disintegration" (91). Furthermore, Safran believes in the importance of this myth as a panacea and utopia when the Diaspora—for economic, political, or social reasons—cannot return home and when circumstances within the host community are less than ideal (94).

For the Thomases, moving to Long Island is a failed attempt to recapture and return to the Puerto Rican countryside. In order to arouse excitement among her children concerning the move, Momma compares Puerto Rico to Long Island frequently. She tells the children: "We want you kids to have good opportunities. It is a better life in the country. No like Puerto Rico, but it have trees and grass and nice schools" (82). Implied is the idea that, faced with the impossibility of returning to Puerto Rico, Long Island is the next closest thing to Momma's "green island." Piri is aware of the comparison being made and rejects it. "This Long Island ain't nuttin' like Harlem, and with all your green trees it ain't nuttin' like your Puerto Rico" (91), Piri tells his mother.

Any return of Piri's family to an imaginary Puerto Rico, such as the move to Long Island, is complicated by the way in which the multiplicity of the national background on the father's side dispels the myth of singular origins. Piri's father does not fit the classical, stereotyped image of a Puerto Rican. Augmenting greatly Piri's colonization and degree of cultural bastardization, his grandfather was a US military soldier stationed in Puerto Rico, hence the English last name of "Thomas." In an job interview, Piri is asked to provide an account for his name, which the employer considers surprising in a Puerto Rican:

"Is Thomas a Puerto Rican name?"

"Er-well, my mother's name is Montañez," I said, wondering if that would help prove I was Puerto Rican. "There are a lot of Puerto Ricans with American names. My father told me that after Spain turned Puerto Rico over to the United States at the end of the Spanish-American War, a lot of Americans were stationed there and got married to Puerto Rican girls." Probably fucked 'em and forgot 'em, I thought (100).

Any "return" for Piri's family will be, necessarily, an oblique journey. The family does not have a singular source of origin to call "patria" for the Land-of-their-Father is multiple and scattered. Their nostalgia is in many ways not so much an attempt at recapturing a place which was lost but a homeland which, for



them, never really existed. The longing is not to return but to attain a sense of belonging to a place. With an understanding of the mythical, unreal, and singular status of Puerto Rico as home, Long Island is enough of an approximation to their Caribbean island to warrant their move there.

When Piri's father says "My father was so proud to be an American that he named all his children with fine American names" (153) the bi-national identity of his father is clear, but not his racial identity. Piri and his father have such a dark complexion that, in the streets of East Harlem, they are often taken for African-Americans. Is Piri's US grandfather African-American? Was he Anglo and Piri's grandmother one of the many Puerto Ricans of African Ancestry, a descendant of sugar plantation slaves? In any case, the racial indeterminacy of Piri only magnifies the sense of nostalgia for singular identities which the return to "homeland" promises but fails to deliver.

Piri disapproves of the family move to Long Island: "I felt that I belonged in Harlem; it was my kind of kick. I didn't want to move out to Long Island" (81). He returns to Harlem frequently while he lives in Long Island: "I really hated Long Island and was making the scene in Harlem most often for pot parties, stompings, and chicks" (88). Nevertheless, once in Harlem, Piri experiences the conflict of being a Latin American of African descent in the United States: Does he claim allegiance to his Puerto Rican community, where he faces racism for being black? Should he seek solidarity on the basis of color with African-Americans, even if culturally there are differences? Accompanied by Brew, his African-American friend, Piri decides to go to the South to investigate his connections with African-American life (127). The positing of the US South as an originary point of return of American Blackness is an unstable assumption which results in Piri's inability to find a concrete answer to his quest for identification with African-American culture.

Piri's return to Harlem is unfulfilling as it makes him realize his unstable, partial allegiances to the Puerto Rican and the African-American communities. This realization makes Piri search elsewhere for origins and identity and this takes him to the US South, where, looking for the essence of Southern Blackness, the complex nature of identity is only heightened in his conversation with an educated and politically-compromised mulatto he meets during this trip. Piri's failure in finding an identity relies on his

belief in identity as monolithic. As Françoise Lionnet proposes in *Autobiographical Voices*, a quest for identity such as Piri's would require a more complex vision of identity in order to succeed:

The reactionary potential of a separatist search for a unitary and naturalized identity is a well-known danger. . . A politics of solidarity thus implies the acceptance of métissage as the only racial ground on which liberation struggles can be fought. (8-9)

Writing from a Francophone perspective, Lionnet's work on Métissage helps to clarify Piri's ethnic identity and is in line with Marta Sanchez' Chicana criticism of Piri Thomas, "La Malinche at the Intersection," which utilizes the idea of Mestizaje embodied in La Malinche/La Chingada to elucidate the racial complexity of Piri Thomas. However, this understanding of Piri as a métis/mestizo character is arrived only through criticism; in the novel, Piri searches for a monoidentitarian self and refuses the possibility of a multiple identity in his rejection of the self-avowed mulatto he meets in the South.

In all cases return to origins are as impossible in *Down this Mean Streets* as they are in *Brown Girl, Brownstones*. Of all these characters, not a single one enacts a successful return to his or her place of "real" or imaginary origin. Piri's move to Long Island with his family proves to be a failed attempt to return to Puerto Rico. Piri's attempt to return to an originary site of US Blackness in the South fails to result in any identification with place. Deighton, Selina's father drowns within sight of the shore of Barbados. Only Selina's planned trip to Barbados appears hopeful even if it remains, at the end of the novel, unaccomplished and hinted as an event beyond the scope of the text.

In *Down These Mean Streets* and *Brown Girl, Brownstones*, migrations are disappointing and returns impossible. In the same manner in which the disappointing migrations enact a critique of developmentalism, the failure of the return voyage serves to question the notion of origins. Quests for unitary points of identity are fruitless at best, fatal at worst. The road retracing ancestry and allegiance bifurcates frequently; like Deleuzian potato roots, they are multiple and frustrate any attempts to find a single point of initial being which could be used for identification. All these characters are left with is a deep rhizomic nostalgia for unitary, imaginary homelands. In this way, the journeys of *Brown Girl, Brownstones* and *Down these Mean Streets* can be utilized to question



the stability of modernism's strongest components through their critique of the notion of origins and progress.

Development and origins are also commented upon in the description of the ethnic neighborhoods in which both novels take place. The presentation of Paule Marshall's Crown Heights and Piri Thomas' East Harlem is one which foregrounds change and development and one which is intent in re-creating a past urban geography which no longer exists. From the opening of the book, Paule Marshall establishes the Brooklyn neighborhood of Crown Heights as the setting of her novel. The idea of development is very present in her historization of this neighborhood, as Marshall reminds us that it hadn't always been populated by West Indians:

First there had been the Dutch-English and Scotch-Irish who had built the houses. There had been tea in the afternoon then and skirts rustling across the parquet floors and mild voices. For a long time it had been only the whites. . . And as they left, the West Indians slowly edged their way in (4).

Nowhere is the development of urban space more salient than in the opening and closing descriptions of a central area of Crown Heights surrounding Fulton Park. At the outset of *Brown Girl, Brownstones*, Paule Marshall describes Fulton Park as an urban garden of Eden:

Chauncy Street languished in the afternoon heat, and across from it Fulton Park rose in a cool green wall. After the house, Selina loved the park. The thick trees, the grass—shrill-green the sun—the statue of Robert Fulton and the pavilion where the lovers met and murmured at night formed, for her, the perfect boundary for her world; the park was the fitting buffer between Chauncey Street's gentility and Fulton Street's raucousness. (13)

In this opening discussion of the geographical context of her novel, Paule Marshall establishes the reference point by which the status of the neighborhood can be measured. This originary reference point is overly idealized and contains elements of the mythical. In the same way in which characters experience developmental growth through travel in these narratives, so does the modern reader experience, through a trip to these New York City neighborhoods, the effect of progress and authorial attempts to undo this developmental progress. Any visitor to Fulton Park today can verify that the park is indeed very green and that the row of restored brownstones along Chauncey Street can in fact be described as having a certain air of gentility. Nevertheless, this

idyllic image is unsettled by the construction, in nineteen-seventies functionalist style, of a public high-school and a six-story apartment complex, which, with its monumental brick façade, fortify the park on its Fulton Street side. The modern visitor will also find the lover's pavilion locked up. The trolley tracks which Paule Marshall mentions later on in her description are also nowhere to be found. What the modern visitor of the Park and Paule Marshall perform in their exploration of Fulton Park is an attempt to return to some initial, pristine point of origination which is ultimately impossible to retrieve. Paule Marshall's attempt in the late nineteen fifties to re-call the state of Fulton Park in the late nineteen-thirties is a veritable re-creation of a site that never was. Paule Marshall's initial description of Fulton Park as seen through childhood recollections not only shows how returns to origins are impossible, but how they are ultimately unrepresentable in literature.

The march of progress is responsible for the final description of Fulton Park at the end of the novel in which the park is presented as having lost its former charm:

She walked through Fulton Park. Before, on a spring night, the mothers would have been sitting there, their ample thighs spread easy under their housedresses, gossiping, while around them spring rose from the pyre of winter. Tonight the moon discovered a ruined park which belonged to the winos who sat red-eyed and bickering all day [and] to the dope addicts. (309)

This image of urban decay enacts a pessimistic evaluation of the idea of development which is continued in her lament for the "the ravaged brownstones" in "an area where blocks of brownstones had been blasted to make way for a city project" (309).

As a foil to her initial historization of Crown Heights as an area earlier occupied by the Dutch, Scots and Irish, Paule Marshall's gestures towards the ethnic re-composition of her West Indian neighborhood at the end of her text. She mentions "the staccato beat of Spanish voices" blending in with her neighborhood's Caribbean English and in so doing highlights the important population of Latin Americans, and particularly Puerto Ricans, in New York City. Though they have moved to areas such as Crown Heights, for these Spanish Caribbean migrants, East Harlem has been traditionally their exiled community's center. The ethnic and geographical transformations evidenced in *Brown Girl, Brownstones* are also revealed in Piri Thomas' *Down These Mean Streets*. Piri



Thomas describes 114th Street between Second and Third Avenue as "Italian turf" (24). Not only have Italians moved out of the neighborhood altogether; the houses Thomas refers to in the novel have been demolished and given way to a city project, 114th street having been converted into a pedestrian walk-way between several monumental buildings for low-income families. The Jewish component of the neighborhood which Piri Thomas mentions in his novel has also left the neighborhood. In fact, the large influx of African-Americans, as West Harlem extends into the Barrio has changed the ethnic composition of the neighborhood considerably. Mexicans have recently moved into El Barrio, which can no longer and perhaps never—because of its heterogeneity—could claim itself to be the unitary reference point of the Nuyorican community.

Piri Thomas' description of El Barrio continue to have elements of re-creation in his geographical descriptions: "The trolley stopped on 114th Street and we got off; Momma wanted to go to La Marketa. The Market ran from 110th to 116th Street on Park Avenue" (46). Not only is there no longer a trolley in the neighborhood, La Marketa has been sized down considerably. A vestige of its former self, La Marketa now comprises only a block on 115th Street. Piri Thomas attempt to re-create, thirty years later, El Barrio as it was in the nineteen-thirties, again proves an impossible task. Excavating the sedimentation left by the pass of progress proves equally difficult for the writer as for the modern visitor of East Harlem attempting to find unitary, original, and intact neighborhood.

DeLamotte ascertains the allegorical component of Marshall's novel which the *Brownstones* and the *Brown Girl*, Selina correspond metaphorically to one another:

By means of this technique, she develops the brownstone simultaneously as a realistic setting that conveys the social texture of Selina's world and an allegorical setting that renders, through those same realistic details, the life of her psyche (11).

However, it appears to me that the Brownstone is synecdoche of the neighborhood and metonymy of the community and that therefore the allegory merits some expansion. The description of the effect of progress on these neighborhoods becomes particularly significant as it parallels the development and maturation of the child protagonists and enables the interpretation of the developing child as an allegory of the community. The transformation and

decay of Selina Boyce's neighborhood is significant in the multiple finality it effects: it marks the end of the neighborhood, the end of the novel, and the end of Selina's adolescence. The neighborhood is utilized as the external referent of internal process and events in the character of Selina. Identity in *Brown Girl*, *Brownstones* is Place and a transformation of one involves changes in the other.

In the case of Piri Thomas, the precise addresses of establishments, businesses, and houses which no longer exist are more than a mere testament to the transformation of the neighborhood; they mirror the personal transformation of the protagonist/author witnessing and experiencing these external, geographical phenomena. Piri Thomas in the Afterword to his novel writes: "Writing Down these Mean Streets was a soul-searching experience for me, in which I forced myself to go back into time." It becomes imperative for Piri Thomas to "go back into time" in large measure to re-imagine his neighborhood because geographical changes have so completely transformed it to the point of making it unrecognizable. In this sense, writing itself becomes a rite-of-passage marking the writer's attainment of a consciousness of the way in which his/her own development separates him from any, albeit imaginary, origin. Generally, in both texts, the fact that the aspect of the neighborhoods in the time-period of the novel does not correspond to the state of neighborhoods at the time of authorial writing, and publication for that matter, necessitates a deliberate reconstruction of space on the part of the autobiographical author, who in turn is forced to acknowledge the personal changes due to changes in the contextual environment shaping his personality. The dialectic relationship between subject and place becomes present in *Down these Mean Streets* and in *Brown Girl*, *Brownstones* to the extent to which the geographical transformations of East Harlem speak to the maturation of Piri Thomas as character and author and the urban transformations of Crown Heights speak to the growth of Selina Boyce as the fictional alter-ego of Paule Marshall. As the characters evolve with the community, it is possible to speak of protagonists as allegorical of their community.

Moreover, their birth in the United States marks Selina and Piri as personifications of Diasporic communities which are neither wholly Caribbean nor completely American. The cultural hybridity which these two characters display as second-generation Caribbean immigrants in the US mirrors their communities diasporic status. Diaspora becomes a useful paradigm to explain certain



non-national allegiances such as that of exiled communities from poorer countries living in the large metropolitan centers of the industrialized world. Analyzing Caribbean-Diasporic novels such as *Down these Mean Streets* and *Brown Girl, Brownstones* becomes an important way to revise Jameson's statement that "all third world texts are national allegories." Aside from the immediately recognizable totalizing danger of making such a blanket statement, signaled by the adjective "all," there are two important remarks to be made on Jameson's statement which concern these two texts. First, consistent with the new globalized economy of late-capitalism, these two novels foreground the ways in which what is traditionally, and problematically, referred to as the "third-world" can be found also within the most industrialized sectors of the planet. Crown Heights and El Barrio in population, language, average income, levels of unemployment, etc. most closely resemble neighborhoods in poorer countries than what is commonly expected of the United States. Second, while the allegorical nature of the texts is clear, is it accurate to refer to these allegories as "national?" If so, just precisely what nation would they be referring to: the nation of provenance, in this case Puerto Rico and Barbados, or the United States, the country in which the action is set? An analysis of these texts allow us to amend Jameson's totalizing comment on the nation and elicit the discussion of Diaspora fomented by critics like Foner, Tötölyan and George.

#### End Notes

1. For a complete overview of the Jameson-Ahmad debate, the reader is referred to the following articles:  
 Ahmad, Aijaz. "Jameson's Rhetoric of Otherness and the 'National Allegory.'" *Social Text* 17 (Fall 1987): 3-25.  
 Jameson, Fredric. "A Brief Response." *Social Text* 17 (Fall 1987): 26-28.  
 "On Literary and Cultural Import-Substitution in the Third World: The Case of the Testimonio." In *The Real Thing: Testimonial Discourse and Latin America*. Guggelberger, Georg, ed. Duke UP: Durham, 1996.  
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